

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

In the Matter of:

"FIRE ON BOARD M/V COLUMBIA"

Date of Fire: June 6, 2000

Docket No.:
DCA00MM030

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Fire on Board M/V Columbia

DATE OF FIRE: June 6, 2000

INTERVIEW OF: Tom Moore
First Mate onboard M/V TAKU

DATE OF INTERVIEW: Friday, June 9, 2000

Place of Interview: Onboard M/V TAKU (Officer's Mess)
while moored at Auke Bay, near
Juneau, Alaska
Alaska Marine Highway System Marine
Terminal

Interviewed by: Mr. Anthony H. Murray
NTSB Operations Group Chairman

Ms. Terry Weaver
NTSB Survival Factors Group Chair

Captain George Brereton
Master of M/V COLUMBIA

LIEUTENANT JAMES BARTLETT
USCG, MSO, Juneau, Alaska

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. MOORE: My name is Tom Moore. I'm the First Mate on the Taku. I've worked out here in this area for about 20 some years. I've been a Deck Officer on different ships in the Marine Highway since 1987. I've been Chief Mate for about, or First Mate, for about four years. That's about it.

For my maritime background, I've worked for Alaska Marine Highway, I was in the Navy and Vietnam on aircraft carriers and stuff and I've worked tugboats, fishing boats, but I've been out here working on the Marine Highway for about 20 years. It's a good job, you meet a lot of people. Very rarely do we ever have anything happen like this, although we drill weekly for this and I truly was pleased at how well everything went; the evacuation and the response of the crew and it just, it really, I mean, I hate to this, but it was surprising to me that it went so well.

The Columbia was very fortunate that we were in vicinity, that the Coast Guard cutter was in the vicinity, there was a couple tugboats not far away, the weather was good and it was in pretty much wide open spaces. They were five to six miles on either side from shore. Another two hours and they might have been 50 feet from shore when it happened and the power's

1 lost and the engines go astern. So it could have been
2 much worse than it ended up being. Yeah, it could have
3 been very bad. The passengers don't realize how bad it
4 could have been. I mean, where the fire was, the fuel
5 tanks were right below, right up above it, is the upper
6 car deck and right off to one side of it on the other
7 side of it, is the other car deck and you know that
8 every vehicle on there has full gas tanks pretty much,
9 so it could have been disastrous, I mean, in short
10 order.

11 But it was really a sight to behold. I was
12 in the rescue boat for about three hours. My job, in
13 an emergency situation, is to run the rescue boat.
14 Actually, I felt kind of helpless; my second mate, Mike
15 Montez (ph), was pretty much in charge of the operation
16 since he's the next deck officer in line and everybody
17 pitched in and did real well, the crews in both ships.

18 And some of the passengers were not too happy, you
19 know.

20 I read some comment where the crew had an
21 attitude about things. Well, from what I saw, we had
22 an attitude all right, but it was a professional
23 attitude and there's always going to be somebody who's
24 going to be unhappy because you don't let them go back
25 to the camper and let them get their four cats out of

1 it or something and if you could have seen the sight of
2 two men, two grown men, crying and sniveling because
3 they get a state room together on the Taku. It was
4 kind of nauseating, but anyway.

5 But, other than that, the Coast Guard being
6 in the vicinity was a real calming effect, I think, on
7 both of the crews and both the Captains and, you know,
8 we expect our crews to do what they're drilled to do,
9 but you never know how people are going to respond
10 until you get a real situation like this and having a
11 Coast Guard cutter Anacapa standing off to the side was
12 real helpful; knowing that they were there. When we
13 had the medical evacuation of the helicopter, I wish I
14 hadn't run out of film.

15 Watching them do the medical evac with the
16 Coast Guard cutter, you know, just hovering over the
17 deck and then the other ship being towed and stuff, it
18 was really a sight to behold. I mean, they were real
19 professional about it and the guy coming down on the
20 rope and then the passenger going up in the stretcher
21 and stuff, it was -- I mean -- I didn't see anything
22 that was flawed about the whole operation. And I'm not
23 saying that just because I work here. It couldn't have
24 gone better as far as I was concerned.

25 The crew, all the way around, should have

1 kudos for this, I think. I mean, a pat on the back,
2 whatever. Everything was done and it was all being
3 pretty much air-rigged because we had never done that
4 before. We had never come along side and evacuated
5 people to another ship. We weren't even sure if the
6 sponsons were going to match up. Everything worked our
7 real well.

8 MR. MURRAY: And we're glad that it did and
9 that is some of the things that we're interested in
10 hearing about, this kind of thing, where it would be
11 possible that two of these passenger liner cruise ships
12 could do the same kind of thing.

13 MR. MOORE: It's very possible. On the
14 cruise ships, I'm unaware that they have the side ports
15 that open up like we do for loading vehicles. If they
16 do, I'm sure it's possible, but, you know, with the
17 shape of the hulls and everything and the way the
18 bridge wings stick out up above the water and stuff, I
19 don't know if would be possible.

20 MR. MURRAY: Right.

21 MR. MOORE: We were just lucky that our two
22 sponsons, which is like a flat surface that sticks out
23 over the door for the ramps to lay down on, they
24 matched up and we were able to put a piece of tubular
25 aluminum scaffolding between the two vessels and cover

1 it with plywood and then rope it off so that everybody
2 had a walkway to walk into between them and stuff and
3 it worked our real well. I mean, I was there to watch
4 everybody go by and they were within four or five feet
5 because I was in rescue boat right between the two
6 hulls. We placed ourselves right underneath where they
7 were off-loading from the Columbia to the other one.

8 Hi, Captain. You met Captain Brereton?

9 MR. MURRAY: Oh, yes.

10 CAPTAIN BRERETON: I'm part of this team.

11 MS. TERRY WEAVER: He's part of this team.

12 CAPTAIN BRERETON: I'm just late.

13 MR. MOORE: But, as far as I was concerned,
14 like I said, where the rescue boat was, I was able to
15 see everybody going from one ship to the other and you
16 saw a lot of people that were very skeptical and
17 frightened and then you see little kids that were just
18 having a great time, waving at everybody and stuff.
19 But I thought it went real well and like I said, I
20 thought the crew of both ships did real well. Better
21 than I had hoped for.

22 But, as far as cruise ships doing that in the
23 future, I don't know if they have the side ports or the
24 hull structure that will allow them to do that. And,
25 having two in the vicinity at the same time, you know,

1 that was just a stroke of luck.

2 MR. MURRAY: Okay, all right. That's been a
3 very good narrative of the events. And we just have
4 some follow-up questions then. Were you on watch at
5 the time when you received the call from the --

6 MR. MOORE: I'm in a non-watch position,
7 which means I'm up anytime something's going on.

8 MR. MURRAY: Right.

9 MR. MOORE: If I'm sleeping, they call me and
10 wake me up and say, get with it, let's go.

11 MR. MURRAY: Okay, all right. So you're
12 actually more of a day worker or both?

13 MR. MOORE: Well, I'm more of an in-port
14 worker. When we come into port, I'm down on the car
15 deck overseeing what's going on, on the car deck, and a
16 lot of the rest of the time, I'm doing paperwork and
17 more and more of that all the time.

18 MR. MURRAY: Right.

19 MR. MOORE: Well, no, but, yeah, I'm in a
20 non-watch position. Most of the other deck officers on
21 the ship work six hours on and six hours off and I'm,
22 unfortunately sometimes, in a non-watch position and
23 I'm working an 18 or 19 hour day, but that's part of
24 the job.

25 MR. MURRAY: Okay, let's see. Could you

1 explain to us a little bit about the towing operation?

2 MR. MOORE: The towing operation went very
3 well as far as I was concerned. I was able to see it
4 from the water and, again, this is something that we
5 practice for and drill for, but we've never done it in
6 actuality that I know of. Even the guys throwing the -
7 - lines, they got them across on the first throw, each
8 one, and I had a hand-held radio and I was telling them
9 ahead of time that we did have the line throwing
10 apparatus, the line guns, up in the forward part of the
11 bow, if we need them to go up and get them and have
12 them on standby because I didn't know how far we were
13 going to stand off the bow of the Columbia and stuff.
14 But we got close enough that each guy threw and, on the
15 first time, he made it over and they pulled the lines
16 out and it worked way better than we had hope for, I
17 thought. I mean, it went without a hitch.

18 MR. MURRAY: Good and you were in rescue boat
19 at this time.

20 MR. MOORE: I was in rescue boat at the time,
21 yes and, yeah, I got a real good bird's eye view or a
22 fish eye view of the whole thing.

23 MR. MURRAY: Let's see, at this time, the
24 Coast Guard cutter team alongside, was that --

25 MR. MOORE: Well, the Coast Guard cutter was

1 pretty much there right from the start. They were,
2 well, maybe about ten or fifteen minutes -- what were
3 they, about five miles away or something at the time?

4 CAPTAIN BRERETON: Four or five, yeah.

5 MR. MOORE: But we had the rescue boat in the
6 water and they were still coming down. They had one of
7 their rescue boats out and we're overhearing the radio
8 operations. I had this hand-held radio here and we can
9 monitor different stations with that. And that's a big
10 help, everybody in the position to having one of these
11 hand-held radios, because you can change -- we were
12 changing frequencies and working between, you know,
13 different ships and being in contact with the bridge
14 and then we could hear, you know, for Coast Guard
15 channels, 16 and stuff, we would work on that. So it's
16 helpful to have these. That was a big a help in the
17 whole operation, I thought.

18 MR. MURRAY: And then, during the -- once the
19 Taku towed the Columbia further offshore, can you
20 explain what went on from there and the evolution of
21 coming along side and your observation and how you felt
22 about that at that time?

23 MR. MOORE: Well, at that time, didn't they
24 do the helicopter evacuation? I mean, we towed the
25 Columbia off the shore and then dropped the lines in.

1 We had medical evacuation at that time with the
2 helicopter pilot and that was real impressive to see.
3 I mean, the guy's a great pilot and you could see him
4 going the channel just matching the speed of the ship
5 and everything went real well on that. As far as I
6 know, once we dropped the lines, we didn't come
7 alongside anymore. The tugboat, The Banner and the
8 Chahoenta come and hooked up with him. Because, you
9 see, we had the medical evacuation going on at that
10 time and that was first and foremost.

11 MR. MURRAY: And that was the passenger
12 evacuated from the Taku?

13 MR. MOORE: Uh-huh.

14 MR. MURRAY: And it had to be a medical
15 evacuation?

16 MR. MOORE: Right.

17 MR. MURRAY: Okay, it wasn't one of the
18 passengers --

19 MR. MOORE: I don't know if it was one of the
20 passengers that came off the Columbia and was on board
21 the Taku. I suspect it might be, but I'm not sure
22 about that.

23 MR. MURRAY: Just to clarify then, that was -
24 - the medical evacuation was after the passengers from
25 the Columbia --

1 MR. MOORE: Right, that was after the
2 evacuation and after we had the tow line and towed her
3 offshore a bit and then we cut the lines loose and then
4 resumed our course in speed and I headed for Juneau and
5 did the medical evacuation. I think that's the way
6 things went.

7 MR. MURRAY: Okay, all right, and during the
8 transfer of the passengers, when you were tied up
9 alongside to one another --

10 MR. MOORE: Uh-huh.

11 MR. MURRAY: Could you just describe your use
12 of the rescue boat and your observation and where you
13 were?

14 MR. MOORE: Well, I was in the rescue boat at
15 the time and, you know, I kept trying to find out where
16 I could be of the best assistance and I just decided
17 that the best position for me was, you know, in the
18 rescue boat because we just came between the two hulls
19 and we positioned ourselves right underneath the
20 platform that people were walking on in case someone
21 slipped, they were going to fall in our boat and not in
22 the water and fortunately nobody did.

23 They had put stanchions up with ropes in
24 between them so everybody had a line to hang onto and
25 stuff, but that way I was right on the scene and if I

1 could offer any advice or any help, I was there.

2 MR. MURRAY: Okay.

3 MR. MOORE: But, yeah, it worked out real
4 well.

5 MR. MURRAY: And what was your observation on
6 how far above the water was the platform?

7 MR. MOORE: The platform was about, I would
8 say, about eight to nine feet above the water because
9 it was a couple fee above my head.

10 MR. MURRAY: Okay, let's see. And about how
11 long was the evolution of transferring the passengers
12 from the Columbia to the Taku?

13 MR. MOORE: Well, I didn't really look at my
14 watch or anything. I would say maybe about an hour
15 and-a-half or so for everybody, you know, it took the
16 longest time for about the first twenty to thirty
17 people to get off because it seemed like they took
18 elderly people and people with wheelchairs and people
19 that were handicapped first. And that was the hardest
20 and the part that took the most time, but, after that,
21 everything seemed to go real smooth. You'd see family
22 units coming do and they would all go and people with
23 dogs and stuff and all that went real smooth, as far as
24 I was concerned.

25 MR. MURRAY: And if you could give us an idea

1 of how you handled the passengers, the extra 400 and
2 some passengers, that came on board.

3 MR. MOORE: All I can say is we did the best
4 we could do and try to make people comfortable.
5 Anytime you're taking off of vacation plans that are
6 pretty well set a year in advanced or something like
7 that, you're going to be distressed and I thought
8 everybody did as good a job as they could do to try to
9 make people feel at home and feel at ease and we opened
10 up the cafeteria for free food so nobody had to foot
11 the bill for anything.

12 We had medical emergencies and we had a
13 doctor that happened to be traveling on board, I think,
14 and his wife was a nurse or something and they assisted
15 us and it was, you know -- I heard nothing but good
16 things that passengers said about the crews, you know,
17 and then I pick up the newspaper and read two ugly
18 comments about the crew had attitudes and treated
19 everybody like crap.

20 Well, this one person in particular was told
21 time and again he could not go back to his camper and
22 get his cats out of there because he had four cats and
23 they were underneath the furniture and the thing was
24 full of boxes and he couldn't even get one of them,
25 but, yet, he kept trying to get back there and the crew

1 had to keep going back and getting him and bringing him
2 up. Well, I'm sorry, you can't do that. So he copped
3 an attitude about the whole operation and trashed it.
4 So, you know, some people won't be happy if you hang
5 them with a brand new rope.

6 MR. MURRAY: The story reporters love to get.

7 MR. MOORE: Well, right, yeah. The Inquirer.

8 MR. MURRAY: Right.

9 MR. MOORE: But, I don't know, I thought
10 everything went real smooth as far as -- and I heard
11 nothing but good from the passengers. Everybody was
12 stressed out, they had their belongings on the ship or
13 they were able to grab just a small handbag and their
14 pets and stuff like that. I thought they did very well.

15 MR. MURRAY: All right, we have Captain
16 George is part of our group too and I'm going to open
17 it for questions from the rest of our group. I don't
18 have any further questions right now.

19 MR. MOORE: Okay.

20 MS. WEAVER: I just have a couple of follow-
21 up questions. You said the doctor and nurse was on
22 board. What did they do?

23 MR. MOORE: Well, if we have a medical
24 emergency on the boat -- if it's something -- I mean,
25 we have trained pursers and trained -- people that are

1 EMT's or go through their own CPR training and stuff
2 like that. It's required that, oftentimes, we'll have
3 medical emergency on their that's out of our realm of
4 dealing with and we'll make an announcement and ask if
5 there's a doctor and a lot of times somebody will come
6 up, but sometimes they'll be on board and they won't
7 because of liabilities or lawsuit potential or
8 something like that. I don't even know of this guy's
9 name was gotten and his wife, but and they hung in
10 there the whole time and they dealt with several people
11 that I know that had medical problems.

12 MS. WEAVER: What type of problems did they
13 have?

14 MR. MOORE: Well, there was one woman that
15 was an asthmatic and she was hyperventilating and I
16 know they had her sitting in the first aid room and we
17 ended up taking her off in Auke Bay when we get in, we
18 had an ambulance called and one gentleman, who had a
19 leg injury that he had prior to that, he went in the
20 ambulance and this other woman refused to go. She
21 didn't want to go the hospital. She didn't want to be
22 taken off the ship and we ended up, I think, footing
23 the bill and taking her to a hotel and getting her
24 airline reservations and flying her home sick in the
25 morning. She did not want to go to the hospital.

1 The poor thing, I mean, watching her, she was
2 just terrified and she wanted no part of the hospital,
3 no part of an ambulance. But we got her calmed down
4 and we ended up taking her to the hotel and the hotel
5 took her to the airport in the morning and we footed
6 the bill, as far as I know, for everything. She was at
7 ease after that.

8 MS. WEAVER: Were there many children on
9 board?

10 MR. MOORE: Quite a few children.

11 MS. WEAVER: How were they doing in transfer?

12 MR. MOORE: Well, some of them you could see
13 were pretty, you know, a little bit scared, looking
14 down over the water, but, I mean, some of them, I mean,
15 I'm looking up, you make eye contact with somebody,
16 they're waving at you and stuff and it gives you a
17 brief moment of things are kind of normal, you know.
18 Yeah, I thought the kids reflected their parents.

19 MS. WEAVER: Did the people have life jackets
20 when they were transferred?

21 MR. MOORE: Everyone did.

22 MS. WEAVER: Also the children, as well?

23 MR. MOORE: Uh-huh, everyone did.

24 MS. WEAVER: You mentioned the ramp that you
25 made. Did you practice that during drills, transfer --

1 you said it earlier --

2 MR. MOORE: As far as I know, we've never had
3 a side-to-side evacuation like this for an evacuation
4 and what we did was just get some scaffolding and laid
5 it across the two ships and put some plywood and
6 dunnage underneath it and we made it a very steady
7 platform and then the guys put some stanchions up and
8 roped them off so everybody had a handhold to walk
9 across and it went real well.

10 There was a woman watchman on the Taku that,
11 I mean, I watched the kids, I mean, as soon as a kid
12 would come in, she would log onto this kid and grab it
13 and she's like a grandma, you know. She would get a
14 hold of them and everything was just fine. I mean, it
15 was a real calming affect on the kids.

16 MS. WEAVER: I don't remember you stating it,
17 but how were you first notified by the Columbia that
18 there was an emergency?

19 MR. MOORE: Well, somebody started pounding
20 on my door and said, "Tom, get up. The Columbia's on
21 fire." And I'd been up all night dealing with Sitka,
22 coming through the narrows and stuff and I was trying
23 to get a couple hours of sleep and that was what I
24 heard was, Tom, get up. The Columbia's on fire. We've
25 got to outside. So I grabbed my clothes and went up to

1 the bridge and by that time, arrangements were being
2 made to come alongside and stuff and you know it
3 happened pretty quick and pretty professional as far as
4 I was concerned.

5 MS. WEAVER: Did you already have passengers
6 on board?

7 MR. MOORE: We had -- I'm not sure exactly
8 how many -- but I'd say, estimate it 150 or so on board
9 and vehicles.

10 MS. WEAVER: So they didn't remain on board?

11 MR. MOORE: No, they remained on board and it
12 was a big adventure to them. They got to film it and,
13 you know, call all their friends when they got home and
14 say they were on this thing that's on the news and
15 stuff, but I've heard from other crewman that a lot of
16 passengers were a big help too. They helped people
17 out, sitting them in place and stuff, taking their
18 belongings out of the way so that old people could sit
19 down and stuff. So it worked out pretty well that way.

20 LT BARTLETT: You answered my question or you
21 asked to answer it, so --

22 MS. WEAVER: Oh. -- Captain.

23 LT BARTLETT: You did a great job. I come on
24 board whey they came in and I got to deal with the bulk
25 of the passengers with Captain Edwards, about 195, I

1 think. That was the number. They were going to
2 Bellingham and, of course, they were the most perturbed
3 because they lost -- bookings and -- so the crews did -
4 - it was awesome. They did a really great job.

5 MS. WEAVER: Anything Captain?

6 CAPTAIN BURTON: Captain George Burton again.
7 Hi, Tom. Thanks for your all your help, first of all.

8 MR. MOORE: Hey, it's my job.

9 CAPTAIN BURTON: Well, we still appreciate
10 it. You mentioned children and I just thought, there's
11 all these little side notes and adventure and all sorts
12 of things that come into life, but I didn't know. We
13 have a steward on board the Columbia that was running
14 around she had a clown nose she uses on the kids and
15 every time she'd see a kid going across, she'd go
16 around and put the clown nose on and cheer them up. I
17 thought that was a great story. It's like a grandma
18 story.

19 MS. WEAVER: Uh-huh.

20 CAPTAIN BURTON: I didn't have any particular
21 questions for you except, could you read maybe into the
22 record, what is this I'm handing you right now?

23 MR. MOORE: It's a note from Captain Reed,
24 our Captain and it's a note that he put together and
25 put for the crew and put in both the messes and --

1 CAPTAIN BURTON: Can you read that into the
2 Record?

3 MR. MOORE: It says, "Thanks for an operation
4 professionally well done. Seldom we are called on to
5 step beyond our normal day's operation to rise to an
6 occasion that calls for us to team together under
7 adverse conditions and provide assistance to other's in
8 need. Yesterday, was just such an occasion. The M/V
9 Columbia's fire left her powerless and her passengers
10 stranded. Her needs were our opportunity to assist
11 others. You, the crew of the M/V Taku, provided the
12 skills, calmness, vigilance and courtesy in a manner
13 professionally unequal. When I consider the scope of
14 the operation you performed, the smoothness in which it
15 all transpired and when, at the end, I felt it was just
16 like another day of the office. This tells me that you
17 cannot have performed any better. Your professionalism
18 was flawless and your assistance to others is totally
19 commendable. As Captain of the M/V Taku, I wish to
20 deeply thank you. Captain Thomas R. Reed."

21 CAPTAIN BURTON: Thanks, Tom.

22 MS. WEAVER: Anymore questions?

23 MR. MURRAY: Yeah, I had one final question.
24 Just if you can explain to us the makeup of your crew
25 composite, your crew complement, that was on the rescue

1 boat.

2 MR. MOORE: The rescue boat was myself, the
3 chief mate, and Ernie Walker, the boatswain. There was
4 just two of us.

5 MR. MURRAY: Oh, okay.

6 MR. MOORE: And it's an inflatable rescue
7 boat and it's for quick emergency rescues. We have
8 three life boats on board that are true life boats and
9 those can be used, you know, for rescue under certain
10 conditions and certainly can carry a lot more
11 passengers, but the rescue boat operation that I was in
12 is just quick, responsive, inflatable-hull boat.

13 MR. MURRAY: Okay.

14 MR. MOORE: And it was really just what was
15 needed for us at the time to get over here. What we
16 use it for, initially, to bring over some extra fire
17 fighting gears, some SCBA's, some outfits and some
18 extra bottles and some oxygen bottles.

19 MR. MURRAY: Okay.

20 MR. MOORE: So, I mean, it was perfect for
21 that and then the Coast Guard assisted us as well, some
22 of the crew off the Anacapa, they were the first -- we
23 were still getting our stuff together an they already
24 had their inflatable in the water so they came up along
25 our port side and I think we all voted for self-

1 contained breathing apparatus fire suits with bottles
2 and face plates and some extra bottles to them. They
3 just took off and took more to the Columbia while we
4 were getting everything loaded in our boat.

5 You know, like I said before, it was real
6 calming affect having the Coast Guard there on the
7 scene and to me, they were professionally -- I'm
8 thinking of the right way to say this -- they did they
9 right thing, I thought, by staying in the background
10 and letting us conduct our own rescue operation, but
11 they were there if we needed the help. I thought that
12 was extremely professional on their part, instead of
13 trying to get in there and tell us how to do things. I
14 mean, I thought that was a real plus. Like I said
15 before, it was calming to not only myself, but I'm sure
16 to both crews and the masters knowing they were on the
17 scene.

18 MR. MURRAY: Okay, well, thank you. That was
19 a very good narrative of all of the incidents that
20 transpired on that June 6th, Tuesday.

21 MS. WEAVER: Thank you, sir.

22 MR. MOORE: Your welcome, Terry.

23 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)